

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
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Lecture - 23

Part B

Ecocriticism

Hello and welcome back to lecture module 2 of the lecture series on Literary Theory and Literary Criticism. In the previous module, we were looking at some of the basic ecocritical concerns and how it engages with, what is concern are and what is premises are and how it seeks to engage with literature, literary text. And we discussed, how perhaps for ecocritical, when deploying an ecocritical approach, it is just a matter of approaching and already familiar text, a very unfamiliar text with a new alertness to the ecocritical dimension. And dimension which has perhaps not received the kind of an environmental reading, which was always present in the text, but largely ignored.

We look at a couple of examples of how this is done and we will look at some couple of literary pieces and see how an ecocritical engagement, which is particular kinds of texts, can be achieved. For instance, let us start by looking at a short piece by Ralph W Black, which is entitled, what we talk about, when we talk about ecocriticism. This is an extended quote, so I will read it out for you. Not long ago, I saw King Lear again, Olivia's Lear, I marvelled as usual at Lear's deep range and deeper sadness and I cried as usual as she carried Cordelias body across the stage at the end. But, I was struck even more by the beginning, a map of the kingdom is unrolled, it is painted across the tan sides of a small herd of a royal deer. The old sovereign uses his sword to symbolically divide his domain among his daughters.

The commodified landscape is sliced up and parcelled out to the highest rhetorical bidder. For a moment, I wonder about my understanding of the tragedy about, what hubristic act instigates Lear's fall, about the significance of the natural world in the play. The moments of clarity that all seems to take place outside in a storm on the most on the sea shore are quote.

Now, as you can understand, this is an ecocritical conscious reading of a Shakespeare's famous play King Lear, where the storm that was originally seen as something that is symptomatic of King Lear's madness. Assumes new dimensions, becomes a very real phenomenon, very near natural phenomenon and we also have references to, you know repeated references to a more further attention. That is being detailed on the minor aspects of the play which were largely ignored, when the play originally takes place.

The movements of clarity that see, there are all seems to take place outside, you know in this storm or the mower, all these elements, all these features become prominent as you deployed in eco critical approaches to reading Shakespeare's King Lear. Now, such a reading adds to the issues, the more traditional approaches to reading a play; that is written by Shakespeare, might have overlooked.

Then, this include issues such as the chopping up of the landscape according to a monox win, you know he was tried as a king have, what write does any human being have to just chop up and divide a landscape, physical landscape according to his own whims and fancies. And you also look at the storm; that is not nearly emblematic of Lear's madness, but access as a natural phenomenon and so on.

Now, the basted, the wind blasted heath and the more that King Lear wonders in his madness put also be a matter of interest and to the eco critics. Eco critical readings of this canonical such canonical text thus, begin by adding a different prospective and are not limited to works that are self immediately about nature. So, even though, King Lear is not overtly, ostensibly saying and it takes explicitly making a statement, like some of the other words that we discussed in the last class, like Thoreau or Emerson works.

You can always attach a kind of eco critical reading to any text that does not even remotely assemble that is not self evidently about nature. Now, a crucial strategy that is deployed seems to be, the ability to switch critical attention from the inner to the outer. So, that what had seemed to be merely the setting of a play or a story, now occupies the centre stage, it occupies the critical centre.

Thus, in the example that we just discussed a storm becomes storm and not just some wake metaphor for the turmoil in King Lear mind. To sight another example, let us take another story by Edgar Allan Poe, his well known story, The Fall of the House of Usher, relates the story of a person called Road Creek Ushur. And Ushur is accompanied by his

sister known as Maidleen and they both are seen as undergoing some kind of a voluntary imprisonment in an inch and isolated and crumbling house, known as The House of Usher.

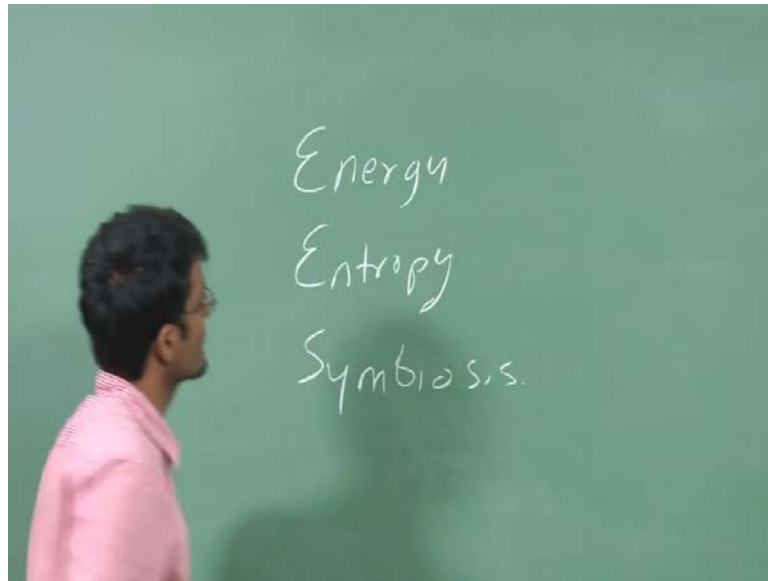
Now, this house we are told stands right next to a very evil looking, very sinister looking lake. We are also told that the sisters of hers are a very strange disease, while Usher himself is a bit of recluse, it is a inter bit of recluse, who does not interact with his physical world or his social world. Now, this famous story is usually understood and retold and read with a focus on the morbid psychology that you know rules over Usher.

And on the strange way in which the narrator, there are three characters, this are narrator, this Maidleen and this Usher and on the strange way in which the narrators arrival, triggers Maidleen decline, mental decline. The story is also read by citing Usher and Maidleen as aspects of the narrators on being; that is as the subconscious on decide to his own rational self.

Now, this is a common literary or critical ploy through which the external and the external element, whether it be the characters, the objects, the situations or is a ploy elements happening in the play, these are all external. And this is a common critical flow where they external is often read as the internal, which in this case would represent the elements of the subconscious itself.

However, in contrast an eco centre reading, focuses on the outside on it on the house and it is environment, rather than the inside, which is to say on the owner of the house and his own hermit psychology. Now, any eco centre reading also uses ideas of energy, entropy and symbiosis.

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For those of few, who are familiar with high with perhaps high school biology, you might recall that entropy is a kind of negative energy within systems, which tends to break them down on it organisations. While symbiosis more or less denotes the very opposite of this act, symbiosis denotes mutually sustaining coexisting systems. We have heard of symbiotic relationships between plants and animals and between animals and animals and so on.

Thus read in this light, we can see that, the house in the house of Usher, exercise and isolated entropic system, which has no symbiotic connections with it is physical world, with it is physical world physical surroundings at all, which has no connections with the broader biosphere. The stagnant lake reflects the house is on and moving image and the house is can be easily seen as breathing in the atmosphere of it is own decay.

The house of Usher, thus becomes not a part of a living system, we understand that no new elements come into the house into the system from the outside to energize it or to enable it to contribute to other systems in a meaningful way. It is basically, the house becomes a light that has basically failed, a stream it sees to flow or a fire that has nothing to burn.

In other words, the house in the house of Usher exercise something like a black hole, which becomes a bit of a vortex into which it is energies are sucked and destroyed. And we also have the assisting with it is companion, the black thunder, the black lake into

which the house eventually collapses and disappears as the story ends. Even, the character of Usher is seen as somebody who is oval culture and who has something otherwise nothing that is derived from nature is all culture and no nature.

We understand from the story that he his photophobic, which is to say that, he is hyper sensitive to light, he likes living in darkness and he cannot bear natural light at all. Interestingly, he prefers the natural light represented in paintings or the artificial light paintings to naturally occurring physical light. We also know that, he cannot bear to hear natural sounds in either and he only leaves of the process sound of artificial music.

Thus, what we have in the story here is basically an ecosystem that is damaged beyond repair and it is basically something that access on it is death throughs. In this reading, the centre of the story is not the dark side, the dark night of the soul with it is a company ontological and cities as was popularly and you know classily imagined. Instead, what we have is the permanent night of a wilfully quoted ecological disaster; that is just something that is happen.

It is something like something that is something like nuclear winter or a case of solar extortion. Now, you can see this offers a much more freighting tail, then the conventional that any of the conventional stories of the story might have often us. And this is because we understand now that as the narrator runs away from the collapsing house, we know that their own be any place for him to left for him to run into it becomes almost apocalyptic in it is tones.

Thus, eco criticism functions counterintuitivly to long standing and deeply in western cultural traditions that depend on anthropocentric attitudes. Now, we know that, Protagoras was an early Greek philosopher, who lived in the 5th century BC. And it was Protagoras, who made the famous statement that man is the measure of all things, which places the human race starkly and confidently right in the centre of everything in the universe.

Similarly, in the book of genesis in the bible, we understand that human beings are given dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground. Similarly, to we have Leonardo Davinci, famous paintings, famous drawing, the Vitruvian Man and if you have access to the internet, I recommend that you know perhaps run a such for Davinci's paintings of the Vitruvian Man.

Now, the painting itself is basically a naked male figure that is set within a circle and a square with his arms outstretched both horizontally and vertically raised and diagonal about his head. Now, see Davenchi's this painting as the proportions of the human body as the basis of one of the most fundamental of all geometric shapes and hence, apparently the most pleasing of all forms.

Now, my point is that, all these and many more images and sayings like these seem to give us a high cultural licence for attitudes, which are anthropocentric, rather than eco centric. So, anthropocentrism is something that needs to be fitted against and seen in opposition to become critical concerns. In the 19th century, the great Victorian art critic, John Ruskin coined the term Pathetic Fallacy.

Pathetic Fallacy was coined by Ruskin in 1856 to account for our instinctive tendency to see our emotions reflected in our own environment, which seems to be another form of the habit of seeing everything. That is centred upon ourselves, which is just basically another anthropocentric tendency. Hence a face like the cruel sea, manifest the pathetic fallacy by projecting in human attribute of cruelty, it can be cruel, it is only human beings as cruel.

So, it just projects a human attribute in which in this case is cruelty on to a very naturally occurring element. Ruskin was also a very deeply eco sensitive person and was the first British, major British writer to record the sense that will nature's powers of recovery may not be infinite as people would have taken for granted or assumed all along.

He also felt that the modern forms of production and consumption have the potential to inflict fatal environmental damage. In his lectures, he often expressed his defence that the atmosphere was being permanently and irrevocably damaged by emissions, such as industrial pollution and so on. Interestingly however, we have in the previous module, we talked about Emerson as one of the pioneering transcendental American eco critical, the pioneers who started the American eco centric movement.

However, you might be surprised to know that Emerson by contrast had no such worries about you know Pathetic Fallacy at all. Nature always wears the colours of the spirit was one of his dicta and we can find this in the first chapter of his *Nature*. And with this, we can now go back to the fundamental distinction between the eco critical approaches

of the United Kingdom and that of the USA; that we discussed earlier you know in the end of the first module of this lecture series.

Rather than seeing it as perhaps a case of simple environmental optimism and pessimism, it would be better to consider the small and crowded island. For example, when we talk about this distinction between you know this approach in UK and USA; we can basically pass down to the geography of these two landscapes, these two land masses themselves, which is to say that instead of just sighting it down as a basic of environmental optimism versus environmental pessimism.

It might be said to assume that a small and crowded island like Britain or say for example, Japan or perhaps more likely to comprehend that the nature that there then manmade that surrounds the natural landscape is being rapidly and irrevocably destroyed by culture. As opposed to a vast land mass as the ones that can be seen in America or Australia for instance.

So, if you are in Aus or if you are an American, perhaps the impact of this kind of environmental degradation will be felt to you much much later than perhaps you know a country like the UK or Japan or perhaps Mauritius. Therefore, to the some of the lecture, let us try to recall, what an eco critic would do or engage with. Eco critics basically are interested in reading, most of the major literary works from very eco centric perspective.

And they deploy a kind of method that pays particular attention to the representation of the natural world, it does not have to be a text that engages directly with nature on themes that can be attributed to nature. But, even perhaps apply like King Lear can read in an eco critical light as we just saw. We also extend the applicability of a range of eco centric concepts, such as balance and imbalance, symbiosis, entropy and energy, mutuality, etcetera.

Using them instead of other natural world concepts, such as growth and development, eco critic also give special canonical emphasis to writers, who foreground in nature as a major part of their subject matter. Such as the example that we talked about in the first module no such as the American Transcendentalist, the British Romantics, the poetry of John Clare, the works of Thomas Hardy and the Georgian poets of the early 20th century, etcetera.

Now, these are a infect that works that foreground nature and it was great degree and the eco critics are you know, they would like to place canonical emphasis on such works. They also extend the range of literary and critical practice by placing a new emphasis on the relevant factual writing, which is especially something that is a reflective, which can be found and reflective materials, such as essays, travel writing and members, etcetera, instead of just focusing on literary text, literary works.

And finally, they might also turn away from this idea of social constructionism, constructivism and linguistic determination of dominant literary theory practices and instead emphasize eco critical value of observation, ethical responsibility and the claim of a world that goes beyond ourselves. And with that we conclude two our part lecture on eco criticism and eco critical concerns.